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The search for meaning amid tasks galore and race to be first

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Opinion: By Invitation

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For most, life is a busy pursuit. But it is good every now and then to take the time to reflect on why you do what you do.

In a merit-based and achievement-oriented society like Singapore, to succeed in school or at work often means standing out in a crowd and ranking ahead of other competitors. The most common performance indicators of success are tangible ones, defined by societal and group norms.

So, for students and their parents, academic scientists and professors, and people in various occupations and organisations, concrete outcomes like academic grades, journal publications and awards, income and wealth, or promotion and power have become the widely accepted ladder of success that drives what they do, and how they do it.

But the pursuit of success is maladaptive when the competitive comparison with others and the craving for salience dominate how we think and feel, and what we do. It will constantly produce stress and strain at the various stages and moments of our lives. It is easy to end up forgetting why we engaged in an endeavour, joined a community or a cause, or even chose an occupation or organisation in the first place.

SCIENCE AND MEANING

Take, for example, the role of academic scientists and their reason for doing science. In a science feature interview published two weeks ago in The Straits Times, I said: "Why are we doing science? It has to be because we want to solve human problems and enhance human well-being. It cannot be to publish in top journals and win awards. That should be the consequence of good science, not the reason for doing it."

Not surprisingly, I received many responses from academics and users of science including policymakers and leaders of public-sector agencies. These individuals reacted positively because they believe in translational research and evidence-based practice - the need to apply scientific research to address practical issues. They know that good science solves real problems.

But somewhat unexpected was the responses received from those who are not academics, scientists or direct users of scientific findings. They shared with me the things they put effort in and spend their time on, and how they are motivated by the personal meaning they find in doing what they believe in, and care about. Most involve contributing to society and making a positive difference to the lives of others in various ways.

A common theme in the comments of many of these Singaporeans from all walks of life was that their personal sense of meaning and well-being came about after they realised how overly consumed they had been in pursuing a singular dimension of success. These dimensions had to do with academic grades in school, a promotion or political power at work, or more wealth and fame - relative to what others had.

MATTERS OF THE MOMENT

Zero-sum competition and comparison with others can lead to adverse consequences, for self and others. Here are some examples - egocentric thoughts lacking in empathy; negative emotions such as anxiety and anger; social divides that breed elitism, envy, contempt and conflict; and selfish acts that advance oneself at the expense of others.

These consequences make it difficult to build interpersonal trust and good quality social relationships, which are among the strongest predictors of individual well-being, group morale and group cohesion.

But beyond these more obvious consequences, there are silent effects that creep into our daily routines and influence how we think, feel and behave. They proceed quickly, moment by moment, resulting in a negative spiral that becomes harder to stop over time.

Here are some danger signs that we may have "normalised" in our daily lives:

- Undiscerning. Concerned with competition from others, an individual takes on every task assigned or available. He works tirelessly to complete them, often providing more details than necessary and without regard to the distribution of work among co-workers.
- Need to win. Fixated on proving one's superiority, an individual is out to win a debate or argument at all cost - never mind the feelings of others and the adverse effect of his responses on them.
- Risk avoidance. Worried about looking bad relative to others, an individual avoids having to do something new or that might lead to him failing or appearing incompetent. This ends up in missed opportunities, errors of omission, and good advice rendered ineffective due to delayed adoption.

The individual caught in a negative spiral of maladaptive performance could be any one of us. At stake is our physical, mental and social health.

Maladaptive performance episodes, which are momentary threats to our well-being, are mutually and self-reinforcing and thus make up a negative spiral. But we are unaware of the danger because each threat appears as a small and necessary daily burden that we take as a given that we have to bear or live with.

It is like being the victim of an abusive or exploitative close relationship. If we are unable or unwilling to identify the danger signs, take action early and react adaptively, it becomes more difficult to get out of the spiral. We could end up like the metaphoric frog that was slowly boiled alive.

WHAT REALLY MATTERS

The dangers of maladaptive performance goals can be countered with mastery and learning goals. The latter shift one's focus to mastering deep skills in a task domain, instead of trying to outdo everyone in every task. They also encourage a genuine learning orientation that seeks to understand issues, contexts and people.

Paradoxically, we achieve personal fulfilment not by putting others down, but uplifting them. Not by comparing ourselves with others, but comparing how others are better off now than before because of what we did.

Research has also identified the job characteristics that help make work meaningful. For example, it is enriching to perform tasks that are complex enough to be challenging but achievable, based on one's competence. We also want some autonomy or control over how to carry out and accomplish the task activities; and we want useful feedback on how we are performing.

Work is also more meaningful when there is a good fit between the person's profile of abilities and needs and what the work demands and offers.

Learning and mastery goals, job characteristics and person-work fit are all important for meaningful work. I call them "process meaning" because they are all about how we do the work. But there is also an equally important aspect of what makes work meaningful, which I call "outcome meaning". This is about why we do what we do, and the impact of what we do.

Outcome meaning is most powerful when it is other-centric, as opposed to centred on oneself. Research has shown that, across many demographics and cultures, people find their lives (and what they do) most meaningful - and they experience good well-being - when they know that they have made a positive difference to other people's lives.

Paradoxically, we achieve personal fulfilment not by putting others down, but uplifting them. Not by comparing ourselves with others, but comparing how others are better off now than before because of what we did. Put in another way, the egocentric pursuit is replaced by a people-centric approach. An approach characterised by passion and purpose, with a genuine desire to enhance the well-being of others, and not a hidden agenda for political gain or to achieve some self-interested goals.

Here is a simple self-test. Are we seeking feedback and finding out other people's needs, concerns, aspirations and viewpoints because we really want to, and not just because we have to?

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Not every matter that we have to deal with truly matters. Of course, it is unrealistic to expect the two to always coincide. But we should distinguish what really matters from matters of the moment.

It is easy to be absorbed in the tasks and matters that require us to work hard to complete, and often to compete. But the outcome of the accomplishment may have little to do with what truly motivates us when we find meaning in doing what really matters. This is important to remember and reflect, especially when we can choose what to devote our time and life to.

Back to the reason for doing science. I asked my academic colleagues and PhD students this question: "When you die, do you want to have beside you a heap of your publications read by a select group of academics, or the peace of mind knowing that your work made a difference to the lives of many?"

The basic issue in this question is relevant to not just academics. We can replace the heap of publications with stacks of cash or collections of symbols of wealth, power and fame. Or anything we accumulated from years of stressful relentless pursuit, driven by a fixation on popular success, prestige and possession, instead of a focus on personal meaning, purpose and passion.

Life is a busy pursuit for most, and a stressful one for many. But life is short and fragile for all. Now and then, we should ask ourselves why we do what we do, and what really matters to us. To pause, remind and reflect, and maybe retrack and redirect.

Competition and comparison are not inherently unhealthy, but it is easy to slip into a negative spiral when we ignore the danger signs.

It is human to want to achieve and accomplish something significant. How then to have a sustained and sustainable sense of personal fulfilment?

Research evidence and anecdotal experiences have provided the answer: when the significance is less about salience in comparison with peers or standing out from them, and more about the positive difference that one makes to other people and the larger community that one is a part of.

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